



## Michelle Wimes of Shook, Hardy & Bacon LLP

### Fostering an Inclusive Work Environment

by CHERYL LOMAX

**Michelle Wimes** left Shook, Hardy & Bacon LLP (SHB) in 2004 as an attorney in the National Employment Litigation and Policy Group, but rejoined the firm in January, 2008 as the Director of Strategic Diversity Initiatives. "I made the decision to return because I wanted to have a global impact on the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women and diverse lawyers," says Wimes. "With Shook having seven offices in the U.S. and two international offices, I believed that this role would fuel my passion for ensuring that more women and minorities are successful in the legal profession."

"Like most law firms, Shook is competing for a relatively small pool of top diverse talent so the firm is continuously looking for ways to differentiate itself from other law firms in an effort to attract and retain the best and brightest," says Wimes. Women and minorities leave law firms for a myriad of reasons including lack of adequate mentoring or training and/or lack of access to key clients, among other reasons. "We have approached retention issues in a number of ways, including identifying the barriers and challenges within our organization that may impact the success of our diverse attorneys, devising programming to address those challenges, and ensuring that our policies support diverse attorneys and

foster an inclusive work environment," Wimes adds.

In early 2008, the decision was made for the firm to conduct its first Diversity Climate Survey/Needs Assessment. Results of the survey will be incorporated into a written Diversity Strategic Action Plan which should continue to drive positive diversity and inclusion results. "We have been willing to undergo the critical self-analysis necessary to understand our internal challenges which will ultimately lead to an improved firm infrastructure and more inclusive firm environment," says Wimes. In 2008, SHB received The Coca-Cola Company's inaugural "Living the Values Diversity Award" and was named by *Working Mother Magazine* as a "Best Law Firm for Women". SHB is also proudly a two-time recipient of the MCCA's "Sager Award".

SHB has already garnered national attention for its efforts to improve diversity and inclusion both within the firm and in the legal profession generally, but Wimes insists that more work needs to be done. Says Wimes, "I recently read Dr. Cornell West's new book, *Hope on a Tightrope*, and found this quote inspirational: 'Inclusion makes possible new dialogues, new perspectives, and critical orientations and questions. Yet only discipline, energy, and talent produce quality.' As a Director of Diversity, I think this statement so poignantly captures the real meat of the diversity and inclusion issue—personal and/or professional success is not determined by the sum of ones differences, but by how much one is truly willing to self-invest in terms of education, hard work, and tenacity." ■